

Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council

People First Language

In Proposals for Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council Grants



Our Community Includes Everyone



Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council



Purpose

This document provides guidance to those preparing grant proposals for the Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council's (DD Council's) grants program. For people seeking guidance on how to talk about disability issues in other arenas, the references listed at the end of this document may provide more specific information.

Background

In the past, people with disabilities have often been pitied, feared or ignored. Heartwarming, inspirational media stories actually reinforced stereotypes, leading their audience to patronize people with disabilities and underestimate their abilities. Often, people with disabilities were sent away to “special schools” and institutions, to live isolated from society. All of this contributed to discrimination and limited the opportunities available to them. People with disabilities were identified by their disability label first, and their other qualities often went unrecognized.

Social movements in the 1960s and 1970s targeted peace, free speech, social and economic justice, women's liberation and civil rights for African Americans and other minorities. Cross-disability rights activism, encouraged by the examples of the African-American civil rights and women's rights movements, did not emerge on a broad scale until the late 1960s. Gradually, people with disabilities began to move out of institutions, with the aim of finding homes and jobs and living in the community alongside the rest of us. Progress has been uneven, and people with disabilities still face many obstacles in their efforts to claim full citizenship. However, American society has begun to move toward a more positive understanding of disability; and we are working toward reflecting that insight in our use of language.

As we build a more inclusive society, we must acknowledge that people with disabilities are, first and foremost, people. They want to lead independent, self-affirming lives and to define themselves according to their ideas, beliefs, hopes and dreams. Our language must recognize our common humanity first. Above all, we must avoid terms that demean or patronize them. In recent years, many in the disability community have come to agree on the use of People First language.

What is People First Language?

The People First self-advocacy movement began in the United States in the 1970s. A group of people with developmental disabilities was organizing a

convention where people with developmental disabilities could speak for themselves and share ideas, friendship and information. Someone said, “I’m tired of being called retarded – we are people first.” The name *People First* was chosen. The development of People First Language grew out of that original statement, “**We are people first.**”

People First language is based on recognizing a person’s humanity and individuality rather than using a label based on disability. It focuses on the person first, the disability last. We use people-first language to emphasize the uniqueness and worth of each person, not just the differences among people. It describes what the person **HAS**, not what he or she **IS**. For example, we no longer say “the disabled”, we say “people with disabilities.” The point is to remember that people with disabilities are people first.

Variations

People First language is the accepted usage in most of the developmental disabilities and independent living communities, but agreement is not universal.

- ◆ **Variant Terms.** Many people with vision impairments, for instance, prefer to be called blind people. Likewise, some people refer to themselves as deaf or hard of hearing. Even where the use of People First Language is almost universal, there are individuals who find some of its usages awkward, wordy, and repetitive.

Parts of the disability community continue to try out a variety of new terms. You may hear or see:

- Physically challenged;
- Handicapper;
- Handicapable;
- Inconvenienced;
- disABLEd; or
- Differently abled.

People First advocates see these terms as condescending euphemisms. Some think they are just too artificial and “cute” for official use. They are certainly not acceptable in formal situations, and many people with disabilities and advocates find them annoying.

- ◆ **Individual Preference.** In common courtesy, any person has the right to be called by the name or term he or she prefers. When dealing with individuals, it is best to ask if you are in doubt.



- ◆ **Disability Pride.** You may sometimes hear people with disabilities speaking to each other in non-People First terms. The Disability Pride movement uses the motto, “We’re Disabled and Proud!” Its advocates encourage people with disabilities to “take back the definition of disability with militant self-pride.”



For now, most presentations, professional articles and grant proposals still require People First language. In official or formal settings, People First language is almost always acceptable. Many rehabilitation publications require its use in their articles. Centers for independent living and advocacy groups for people with disabilities often require it for any official purpose.

Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council Grant Proposals

The Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council (DD Council) uses People First language as its standard. We require use of People First language in all of our products. We also expect People First language in grant proposals and in all products of our grant projects. This document provides specific guidance to anyone who is developing a DD Council grant proposal.

Points to Remember

1. Mention the person first and the disability second. Remember that the person is not the condition. To keep your emphasis on the person:

Do Say	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A woman with a physical disability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A physically disabled woman.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A man with intellectual disabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An intellectually disabled man, or • A retarded man.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with disabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The disabled.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person who has autism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An autistic, or • An autistic person.

2. Some words and phrases should NEVER be used because they carry serious derogatory connotations. Some of the most hurtful terms include:

NEVER Say:	Say Instead:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victim. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with a disability.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afflicted by ..., Suffers from ..., or Stricken by ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crippled or lame. • Handicapped. • Deformed, or deaf and dumb. • Defective. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a disability.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfortunate, pitiful, or burden. 	<p>Nothing.</p>

The words and terms under “Never Say,” above, are always hurtful when used to describe people.

People with disabilities don’t want to be seen as victimized, afflicted, suffering or stricken. “Crippled,” “lame,” “handicapped,” “deformed,” and “deaf and dumb” are all negative, emotion-laden terms that speak to **lack** of ability. “Defective” is dehumanizing. Appliances may be defective - Babies are not. As for “unfortunate,” “pitiful,” or “burden,” just don’t use them to refer to people with disabilities. These are inappropriate emotional terms. They foster inaccurate stereotypes and serve no useful purpose.



3. People who use wheelchairs use them as tools for getting where they want to go. Many feel that they are **freed** by their wheelchairs, certainly not imprisoned by them.

NEVER Say:	Say Instead:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confined to a wheelchair. • Wheelchair-bound. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses a wheelchair.

4. Adults with intellectual disabilities are adults.

NEVER Say:	Say Instead:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childlike, boy, or girl, when talking about an adult. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person, man or woman.

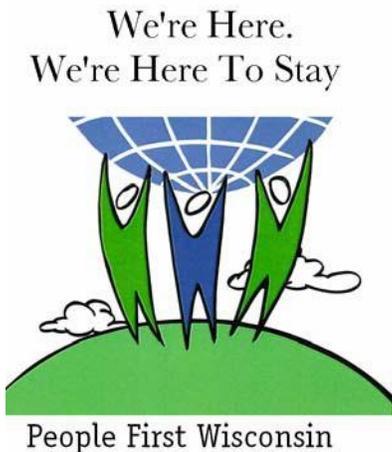
5. Use objective descriptors instead of these negative, emotional terms.

Do Say	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John Smith has cerebral palsy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John Smith is a cerebral palsy victim. • John is a cerebral palsy (or a CP).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A woman with muscular dystrophy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A woman who is afflicted by muscular dystrophy. • A woman who suffers from muscular dystrophy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mary Jones uses a wheelchair. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mary Jones is confined to a wheelchair. • Ms. Jones is wheelchair-bound.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Johnson uses crutches. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Johnson is crippled. • He is a cripple.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A newborn with disabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A defective newborn. • A child with birth defects.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with mental retardation (or intellectual disabilities). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mentally defective. • The mentally retarded. <p>And absolutely not:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retards.

6. When describing people who do not have disabilities say, “People without disabilities.”

Do Say	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People without disabilities • Temporarily Able-Bodied person (TAB). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normal people.

7. People with disabilities are **NOT** chronically ill or sick. A disability may be caused by a disease like polio or rubella, but the disability is not the disease. Do not say “patient” unless you are talking about the relationship between a person with a disability and a health care professional.



8. Avoid casting a person with a disability as “inspiring,” or as a superhuman model of courage. People with disabilities are people, not tragic figures or demigods.

- They do not require special courage just to live;
- Most do not think that their lives should “inspire” you; and
- Some of them are not always cheerful.

9. Do not use “special” to mean segregated. Separate schools, or buses just for people with disabilities, are situations that disconnect them from their community, and the separateness often interferes with their getting where they want to go or doing what they want to do. Many of them feel that there is nothing special about these segregated settings.

10. Avoid terms that suggest that the disability itself makes someone “special.”

Do Say	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children who receive Special Education Services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special children; or • “Special Needs” children.

11. Would you like to be labeled? ... To be defined by only one part of who you are? Using People First language is a matter of good manners and treating people the way you would like them to treat you. Address others as you would like to be addressed.

12. If the disability is not relevant to your context, why mention it at all? Say “man,” “woman,” “child,” “employee,” “member.” Or, to quote from the Texas Council on Developmental Disabilities, say:

“Friends, neighbors, coworkers, dad, grandma, Joe's sister, my big brother, our cousin, Mrs. Schneider, George, husband, wife, colleague, employee, boss, reporter, driver, dancer, mechanic, lawyer, judge, student, educator, home owner, renter, man, woman, adult, child, partner, participant, member, voter, citizen, amigo or any other word you would use for a person.”



References

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